

A Celebration of Nature: Antoni Gaudí and Other Catalan Architects

Background Notes

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Basilica de la Sagrada Família, Barcelona, 1883 -

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Barcelona became one of the most creative architectural centres in Europe. At the heart of this flourishing cultural moment was the movement known as Modernisme, the Catalan counterpart to Art Nouveau. Catalan architects sought to develop a style that combined technical innovation, craftsmanship, regional pride, and above all a deep engagement with nature. Among them, Antoni Gaudí stands as the most extraordinary figure, but he was not alone. Architects such as Lluís Domènech i Montaner and Josep Puig i Cadafalch also played vital roles in shaping the architectural identity of modern Catalonia. Gaudí's architecture is perhaps the most radical expression of the idea that nature is the ultimate source of form. His buildings seem less constructed than grown, as if they have emerged organically from the earth.

Antoni Gaudí was born in 1852 in Reus (or possibly nearby Riudoms) in Catalonia. His upbringing in a region rich in traditional craftsmanship had a lasting impact on his architectural imagination. Gaudí's father was a coppersmith, and from an early age the young Gaudí was exposed to the shaping of materials into complex forms. This experience may partly explain his later fascination with structural experimentation and his deep respect for artisanal craft.

He moved to Barcelona to study architecture at the Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura, graduating in 1878. According to a well-known anecdote, the director of the school reportedly declared upon awarding Gaudí his diploma: *"We have given this academic title either to a fool or to a genius."* Time would suggest the latter. During his student years, Gaudí absorbed a wide range of influences. He studied Gothic architecture intensely, admiring its structural logic and vertical dynamism. At the same time, he was fascinated by Islamic architecture, particularly the ornamental richness of the Alhambra. These historical styles would provide inspiration, but

Gaudí's ultimate teacher was nature itself. He believed that the natural world offered the most efficient structural solutions and the most beautiful forms.

Gaudí's early career already reveals his experimental spirit. One of his first important commissions was Casa Vicens, built between 1883 and 1885 for the industrialist Manuel Vicens. Casa Vicens (1) demonstrates Gaudí's early fascination with colour, pattern, and materials. The building's façade is covered with vibrant ceramic tiles arranged in geometric patterns inspired by plants growing on the site. Its design reflects a strong Moorish influence, particularly in the use of decorative brickwork and tiled surfaces.



(1) Casa Vicens, Barcelona, 1883 - 1885

Even at this early stage, Gaudí's architecture rejects rigid symmetry in favour of a lively interplay of volumes and textures. The house feels playful, almost exuberant, and already hints at the imaginative freedom that would characterise his later masterpieces.

A crucial turning point in Gaudí's career came with his encounter with the wealthy industrialist Eusebi Güell. Güell became not only Gaudí's patron but also his close collaborator and supporter for many years. Güell recognised Gaudí's extraordinary talent and gave him the creative freedom to pursue ambitious architectural experiments. Their partnership produced several of the architect's most remarkable projects, including Palau Güell, Parc Güell, and the Colònia Güell church. Without Güell's financial support and intellectual sympathy, Gaudí's architectural imagination might never have found such full expression.

Completed between 1886 and 1890, Palau Güell **(2)** was designed as the Barcelona residence of the Güell family. Situated near La Rambla, the building presents a relatively restrained stone façade punctuated by two dramatic parabolic archways that allow carriages to enter the house. Inside, however, the architecture becomes increasingly theatrical. The rooftop is populated with fantastical chimneys covered in colourful mosaics, transforming functional elements into sculptural forms. Even at this stage, Gaudí was exploring the fusion of architecture, sculpture, and decorative arts that would define his mature work.



(2) Palau Güell rooftop, Barcelona, 1886 - 1890

No discussion of Gaudí can avoid his greatest and most famous project: the Basílica de la Sagrada Família, a building that has become one of the most recognisable churches in the world **(Cover image)**. Gaudí began working on the church in 1883 and devoted the final decades of his life almost entirely to its design and construction. The project was still incomplete at the time of his death in 1926 and remains under construction today.

The Sagrada Família represents Gaudí's most profound attempt to translate the principles of nature into architecture. Inside, the branching columns resemble trees rising into a stone forest canopy. Light filters through stained glass in shifting colours, creating an atmosphere that feels both mystical and organic.

Gaudí developed highly innovative structural solutions for the church, using models with suspended chains and weights to calculate the optimal curves of arches and vaults. These forms—known as catenary curves—allowed him to create structures that were both strong and visually fluid.

The building is also deeply symbolic. Each façade tells a different part of the Christian story: the Nativity, the Passion, and the Glory of Christ. Gaudí himself became increasingly devout in his later years, living a modest life dedicated to the project. In recognition of his profound spiritual commitment, there has even been discussion within the Catholic Church of Gaudí's possible canonisation. In 2003 the Vatican began a formal process examining his life and works, and he has since been declared a "Servant of God."

Another major collaboration between Gaudí and Eusebi Güell is Parc Güell (3), conceived between 1900 and 1914 as an ambitious garden suburb. Although the residential development failed

commercially, the site has become one of Barcelona's most beloved public parks.

Here Gaudí fully integrated architecture with landscape. The famous serpentine bench that curves around the main terrace is covered in *trencadís*, a mosaic technique using fragments of broken ceramic tiles.

The bench's undulating form follows the contours of the hillside and provides sweeping views over the city.



(3) The serpentine bench, Parc Güell, Barcelona, 1900 - 1914



(4) Casa Batlló, Barcelona, 1904

Around 1904 Gaudí undertook the radical transformation of an existing townhouse on Barcelona's Passeig de Gràcia, creating Casa Batlló **(4)**. The building's façade is covered with shimmering mosaics that resemble the surface of water. The balconies suggest skeletal masks, giving the building an almost living presence. The roof is often interpreted as representing the back of a dragon, its curved spine covered with scales of coloured tiles. This imagery may allude to the legend of Saint George, the patron saint of Catalonia.

Gaudí's final major civic work was Casa Milà **(5)**, completed between 1906 and 1912.

Nicknamed *La Pedrera* — “the stone quarry” — because of its rugged appearance, the building features a sweeping stone façade that appears to move like waves.

The wrought-iron balconies resemble tangled seaweed. The rooftop is perhaps the most striking element. Here Gaudí transformed chimneys and ventilation shafts into sculptural forms that resemble mysterious warriors standing guard over the city.



(5) Casa Milà, Barcelona, 1906 - 1912

While Gaudí's work often appears eccentric and deeply personal, other Catalan architects pursued different approaches within the Modernisme movement.

Lluís Domènech i Montaner was both an architect and a scholar who sought to combine modern engineering with historical and decorative traditions.

His most celebrated building is the Palau de la Música Catalana, completed in 1908. The concert hall is famous for its extraordinary stained-glass skylight and richly decorated interior filled with mosaics, sculpture, and ceramic ornament. Domènech also designed the Hospital de Sant Pau, a vast complex of pavilions set within landscaped gardens, combining medical functionality with artistic beauty. Domènech's architecture reflects a belief that modern buildings should celebrate Catalan culture through craftsmanship and decorative arts.

A third important figure is Josep Puig i Cadafalch, whose architecture often drew inspiration from northern European Gothic and Catalan medieval traditions. His most famous building is Casa Amatller (1898–1900), also on the Passeig de Gràcia, which stands beside Casa Batlló. With its stepped gable façade and elaborate ornament, the building reflects influences from Flemish architecture. Puig i Cadafalch later became an important political figure and a defender of Catalan cultural identity. His work reflects the strong link between architecture and nationalism that characterised the Modernisme movement.

Together, Gaudí, Domènech i Montaner, and Puig i Cadafalch helped transform Barcelona into one of Europe's most visually distinctive cities. Their buildings celebrate craftsmanship, regional identity, and the beauty of the natural world. Yet Gaudí remains unique among them. His architecture transcends stylistic categories

and seems to belong to a world of its own—one in which stone flows like water, columns grow like trees, and buildings appear to be living organisms.

Selected Reading:

Robert Hughes: *Barcelona* (Vintage Press, 1993)

William. H . Robinson, Jordi Falgàs and Carmen Belen Lord: *Barcelona and Modernity: Picasso, Gaudí, Miró and Dalí* (The Cleveland Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2006-7)

Juan Bassegoda Nonell: *Antonio Gaudí, Master Architect* (Abbeville Press, 2001)

Judith Carmell Arthur: *Antonio Gaudí: Visionary Architect of the Sacred and the Profane* (London : Carlton, 1999)

Philippe Thiébaud: *Gaudí: Builder of Visions* (Thames and Hudson, 1992)

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